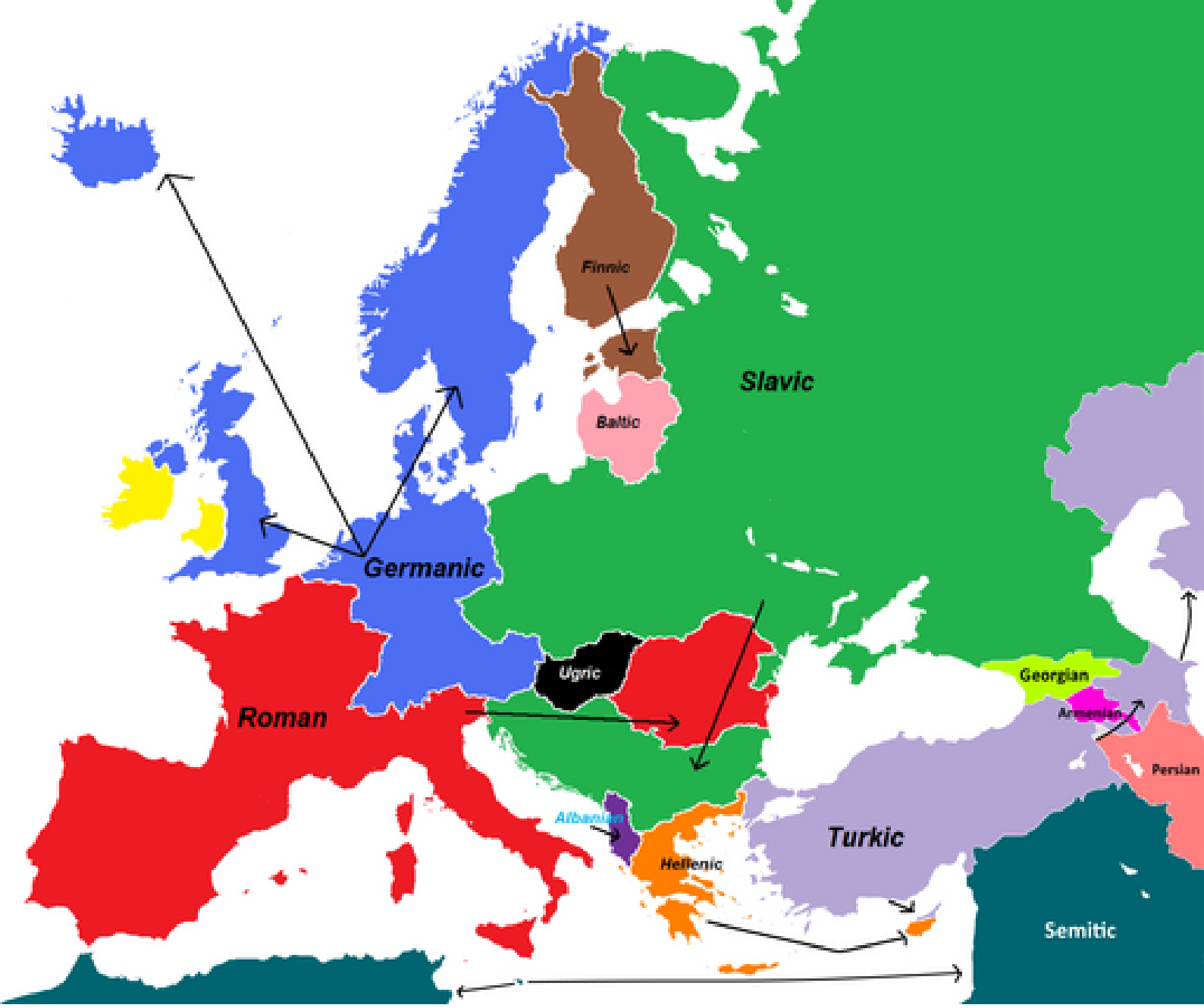


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Combining tech and tradition to revive Europe's endangered languages

CREATIVESUNITE

Co-funded by the European Union

The quest is on to support endangered European languages, some with only a handful of speakers left.

“This was valuable to show members of these communities that they're not alone - Justyna Olko, ENGHUM

By Gareth Willmer*

Like civilisations, languages rise, fall and disappear. Even in Europe, which strives to uphold its linguistic diversity, dozens of regional languages are on the road to extinction. But the work of experts like Justyna Olko could help to change that.

As a teenager in the 1990s, Olko became fascinated by the indigenous cultures of the Americas, which drew her to study archaeology at the University of Warsaw. But her postgraduate research on the Nahua people of central Mexico made her realise that her true calling lay in sociolinguistics and indigenous history.

‘In a way, Nahuatl took me back to Poland in recognising the problems of linguistic discrimination and language endangerment,’ the Polish historian and sociolinguist said.

Olko received a grant in 2012 for a 3-year project about the Nahua’s culture and language, which she learned to speak, including researching models for its revitalisation.

But the project also dealt with minority languages from the south of Poland, spoken by far fewer people: Lemko, with around 11 000 speakers, and Wymysiöerys, now with a few dozen speakers. Olko has learned some Lemko and intends to learn Wymysiöerys too.

Endangered or at risk

Now a professor at the University of Warsaw, Olko has broadened her work on language preservation through a series of projects on minority languages and their revitalisation, like the EU-funded ENGHUM, which she led for 3 years, until December 2018.

The critical threshold for the survival of a language is estimated at 300 000 speakers. According to UNESCO, there are 221 endangered regional and minority languages in the EU.

While in the past, the reason might have been repressive language policies by dominant ethnic groups and nation-states. Today, it's the dwindling numbers of native speakers who stop speaking the minority language with their children.

Keeping languages alive, Olko explained, is vital for preserving a sense of identity, emotional attachment and centuries-long knowledge encoded within them, but also for improving well-being and communication between generations.

'When you see older generations speaking the heritage language but addressing children in the dominant one, the children are excluded from an intimate sphere of communication and sense of belonging,' she said.

Sense of togetherness

Much of the ENGHUM team's focus was on minority languages in Poland and indigenous languages in Mexico (Nahuatl, Mixtec, Ayuuk), but the aim was to start broadening the recognition of endangered languages in general.

Along with sociolinguists and anthropologists, ENGHUM researchers also brought together representatives of local communities to interact in person and exchange experiences and knowledge in a large number of workshops, field schools and cultural events held in both Europe and Mexico.

'This was valuable to show members of these communities that

they're not alone and that they face similar problems,' said Olko.

Inspired by this exchange, many community members created their own social networks to stay in touch and continue exchanging resources.

Olko acknowledged that language revitalisation has today become more challenging, amid the rise of the political right and nationalist identity politics in Europe.

This May, for instance, Polish President Andrzej Duda vetoed a law that would have officially recognised the Silesian language, spoken by almost 500 000 people in south-western Poland.

This, Olko said, makes it even more important to strengthen preservation efforts and make such languages sustainable, which is why the ENGHUM team created the Center for Research and Practice in Cultural Continuity at the University of Warsaw.

Soon, new initiatives were rolled out, continuing to shed light on endangered languages and broaden the number of languages covered. These include the newly launched EU-funded language project MULTILING-HIST.

'This push is mission-focused,' said Olko. 'We're starting with new partners, continuing with old partners, and developing networks. I haven't stopped working with a single community that I started working with.'

Diverse focus

Other experts in Europe are also recognising the importance of preserving minority languages.

As part of these efforts, the EU-funded RISE UP collaborative initiative, which runs until January 2026, focuses on the revitalisation of five of them: Aranese in Spain and France; Aromanian in the Balkans; Burgenland Croatian in Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia; Cornish in the UK; and Seto in Estonia and Russia.

'We've selected case studies that are diverse in their settings,' said Gisela Hagmair, a specialist in applied linguistics and

language policy at Vienna-based non-profit research and innovation organisation Minds & Sparks, who is coordinating the initiative.

The five languages all have a different status and level of endangerment. For instance, Aranese is officially recognised as Catalonia's third language, while Seto is not recognised at all as a language in Estonia.

Cornish effectively became extinct but has undergone revival efforts, while the speakers of Aromanian, which shares many features with modern Romanian, are scattered across the southern Balkans as they were traditionally travelling shepherds and merchants.

Like ENGHUM, Hagmair and her team also work on connecting people and raising awareness.

One initiative saw a musician or poet from each language community chosen for a week-long residency in Barcelona in May this year. Each of them created a voice-based work in their own language, inspired by their native landscapes and folk stories, interspersed with bird song.

They also jointly composed "Woodpeckers", a composition that combines all five languages with sounds of nature.

'These types of initiatives help to increase visibility through working with the communities, but they also give them something back,' said Violeta Heinze, a research analyst at Minds & Sparks who also works on RISE UP.

In sync with 21st-century trends, the team has hosted online workshops on subjects like developing communities for language activism and digital tools for supporting minority languages. These included presentations from activists and community members using a variety of popular online social media channels to promote their languages.

Next generation

List of Categories in UNESCO's Endangered Languages Atlas - source wikimedia

On top of that, RISE UP researchers have created a digital repository of resources and are developing an app for communities to interact and create learning resources.

It will also include a reward system for users to complete tasks in the language they're learning, such as ordering food in a café. One aim of these online activities is to get young people to engage with their regional languages, often mainly spoken by older generations.

'That's one of the things that fascinates me,' said Hagmair. 'What does it take to make these languages more attractive again to young people?'

RISE UP is also working on plans to dub popular TV programmes in minority languages and intends to organise a round table that it hopes will attract decision-makers at the European and local levels sometime next year.

This is important for expanding discussion and awareness, said Hagmair, who also highlighted another key reason for preserving minority languages.

'When you translate, you sometimes realise that some phrases are not possible to translate completely accurately,' she said. 'Losing languages means that the knowledge and richness of cultures is lost.'

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- ENGHUM
- RISE UP

- MULTILING-HIST
- Research and innovation dedicated to cultural heritage
- About multilingualism policy - European Education Area